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**JILL BILLINGS**  

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STATE REPRESENTATIVE

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**REP. BILLINGS INTRODUCES RURAL BROADBAND EXPANSION BILL**

*Legislation will expand grant program to foster rural economic development*

MADISON - Representative Jill Billings (D-La Crosse), along with Senator Janet Bewley (D-Ashland), introduced LRB-1505, a bill that expands the Broadband Expansion Grant Program. LRB-1505 is Rep. Billings' first legislation of the 2015-2016 session.

"In today's economy, infrastructure investments aren't just about roads, bridges and waterlines, it is also ensuring rural communities have access to high-speed internet," said Rep. Billings.

The Broadband Grant Expansion Program was created in 2013 to provide high-speed internet access to underserved areas of the state. Under current law, only certain entities are eligible to apply for the grant. Current eligible applicants include; profit or not-for-profit businesses, a telecommunications utility, or a city or town board. LRB-1505 would build upon the existing program by allowing additional entities to apply for grants. The bill will allow for school districts, technical college districts, and public library boards to be eligible to apply for broadband expansion grants.

"In today's technology-driven environment, internet access is essential for economic development, education, public safety, and more," said Billings. "The Broadband Expansion Grant Program was created two years ago to increase opportunity and revitalize communities by providing high-speed Internet access to previously underserved, rural areas."

In his 2015-2017 budget proposal Governor Walker allocated an additional \$6 million from the Universal Service Fund to the Broadband Expansion Grant Program.

"Expanding broadband service to rural areas is necessary to foster growth in our state," said Billings. "In some areas, the local library, school or technical college serve as a center of the community - and may be better suited to provide Internet access. This bill simply allows these locations to apply for grants to serve their communities."

The Rural Broadband bill is part of the Assembly Democrats' 2015 agenda: a rollout of "15 Bills for 2015." The 15 bills also include raising the minimum wage, providing opportunities for local businesses, and creating a nanotechnology hub at the UW-Extension.

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